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Jennifer Davis, *Charlemagne's Practice of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xix + 531 pp. Maps, tables, and graphs. \$155.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-1-107-076990.

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The Carolingians, in general, and Charlemagne, in particular, have received enormous scholarly attention since the beginning of professional history writing in the nineteenth century. For the most part, the focus of this scholarship has been on the achievements of the Carolingians and the goals of the rulers of this dynasty. Historians have been far less interested in the question of how the Carolingians achieved such remarkable success in so many areas. For this reason, the study by Jennifer Davis, associate professor of history at The Catholic University of America, is a welcome addition to the burgeoning volume of work on Charlemagne and his reign (768-814). It is Davis' goal to ascertain the ways in which Charlemagne was able to exercise effective government across a vast empire that encompassed the majority of Western Europe. In doing so, Davis draws heavily upon the extensive corpus of surviving edicts, commands, and legislation that fall under the general rubric of the capitularies, although almost only from Charlemagne's reign itself. This is material with which Davis is intimately familiar, and her command of the subtleties of these texts and their manuscript traditions comes through clearly throughout the volume. Davis also draws quite frequently from the numerous historiographical works that were produced during Charlemagne's reign, including not only the large-scale narratives such as the *Royal Frankish Annals*, but also the two dozen or so texts often denoted by scholars as the lesser annals. Davis makes far less use in her study of the large corpus of surviving letters from Charlemagne's reign, including those involving the Carolingian ruler directly, and those exchanged by numerous ecclesiastical and secular officials. Similarly, Davis is sparing in her use of royal charters. The exceptionally large and growing corpus of material information developed by archaeologists for Charlemagne's reign makes only a very limited appearance in the text.

The volume as a whole is divided into three sections. These are comprised of three, three, and two chapters, respectively, and are bracketed by a lengthy introduction and a very short conclusion. In the introduction, Davis discusses the main question that drives this study, which is how Charlemagne was able to rule such a large empire so effectively given what the author sees as the limited nature of the administrative tools at his disposal. Rather than providing a chronological narrative of the Frankish king's reign, Davis proposes to identify what she calls "patterns" of rulership, which are visible through different types of sources and different elements of governmental action, to adduce broad principles of governance under Charlemagne. Davis specifically eschews reading back into Charlemagne's reign any later developments, which can be problematic in some cases (see below). More problematically, Davis also tends to ignore, both in the introduction and throughout most of the text, many elements of Frankish royal governance in the period before Charlemagne's accession in 768 that would provide context for developments that Davis ascribes specifically to Charlemagne himself.

The first section of the volume is entitled "Strategic Rulership," and here Davis investigates in turn Charlemagne's efforts to manage royal agents, discipline royal agents, and Charlemagne's response to

dissent. In the first chapter, Davis emphasizes what she describes as Charlemagne's consistent pattern of establishing overlapping jurisdictions as a tool both to ensure that a specific task was accomplished and that individual royal agents did not accrue too much power in their own hands. In order to demonstrate this paradigm, Davis focuses her attention on judicial affairs in light of the prominence that the provision of justice played in the capitularies. In the area of the provision of justice, Davis makes clear, against the views of scholars such as Timothy Reuter, that the capitularies actually provide a clear understanding of day-to-day activities of royal governance and were not simply royal wish lists.[1] Davis does a good job of bringing together all of the individual royal commands found in the capitularies dealing with the provision of justice by various royal officials, including *missi*, counts, *centenarii*, and *iudices*, although Davis appears to have been unaware of the scholarship that holds *vicarii* were, in fact, the same officials as the *centenarii*.

One can agree with Davis's argument that Charlemagne sought to establish "creative tension" among his various officials without, however, accepting her assertion that the royal court did not sort out the various competencies of royal agents at the local level. Indeed, as Davis points out, *centenarii* were specifically excluded from hearing certain types of cases. On her more general point that the surviving capitularies do not explain what to do if a case could be heard by more than one type of official, e.g. *missi* and counts, it should be emphasized that the lack of clarity at a 1200-year remove does not entail that counts and *missi* were unaware of who held precedence in particular circumstances. In this context, Davis does not point to any conflicts between counts and *missi*, but rather stresses that they adhered to the royal insistence that they cooperate. One final point to be made regarding the first chapter is that the idea of establishing creative tension among office holders was hardly unique to Charlemagne and, indeed, had been an element of Frankish royal governance since the Merovingian period, as made all too clear by Gregory of Tours' constant complaints about comital interference in the performance of his governmental duties.

In the second chapter, Davis considers the tools at Charlemagne's disposal to ensure that the men who served as royal officials actually carried out their duties. Following much of the recent scholarship in regional studies on the Carolingian Empire, Davis asserts that Charlemagne did not seek to impose his own candidates for local office, but rather allowed local politics to determine who would emerge. However, Davis does not provide evidence to support this contention, and is content to rely on earlier studies that presume a causal relationship between tenuous demonstrations of familial relationships and local "control" over office holding. Contrary to the conclusions of historians such as Matthew Innes and Jürgen Hannig,[2] Davis does provide ample evidence that local officials were not independent operators with titles, but rather followed the king's direction in carrying out their duties. Here, Davis points to the central role played by the *missi* in overseeing the activities of local officials, and also the power of the king to remove counts from office for failing to perform their duties effectively. Davis argues that Charlemagne rarely did remove counts, however, and preferred instead to correct them or work around them. In this context, Davis points to the inconsistent reasons offered in the capitularies that might give the king cause to remove counts and concludes that Charlemagne developed no general principles for removing his officials from office. What Davis seems to miss here is that the general principle was that Charlemagne could remove counts, and that it was his judgment that determined the grounds for dismissal.

The third chapter is focused on Charlemagne's response to dissent, and particularly his response to rebellions against his reign. Davis includes among these rebellions, not only the well-known attempted insurrections by Hardrad and the group of aristocrats around Pippin the Hunchback, but also the revolt of Hrodgaud, the duke of Friuli. This last conflict seems to be better understood as a revolt against foreign rule, such as those in Saxony, rather than in internal rebellion. Like many other scholars before her, Davis devotes considerable attention to the implications of the efforts by Hardrad and the clique around Pippin to overthrow Charlemagne but, refreshingly, from the point of view of the king rather than the would-be rebels. Davis shows Charlemagne as a ruler who was undeterred by dissent and

dissatisfaction with his policies, and who continued to drive home his administrative and governing reforms despite some aristocratic opposition. Davis also describes Charlemagne's response to the two internal, attempted rebellions as illuminating his governmental practice by waiting until matters had reached a head before responding. One might just as well conclude that Charlemagne waited until all of those involved had declared themselves, before closing the net. In light of Davis's later discussion of Charlemagne's voracious appetite for information, her discussion of the crushing of the rebellions is a missed opportunity to deal with the government's intelligence-gathering capacity. One might also have hoped for a bit more emphasis on the fact that these two attempted rebellions achieved absolutely nothing before the leaders were caught and either executed, blinded, or sent into exile, and thus perhaps have been given greater attention by scholars than they merit.

In part two of the volume, Davis is concerned less with specific mechanisms of royal governance under Charlemagne than in demonstrating that his realm is best understood as a unified empire, rather than as a congeries of regions. Chapter four, called "An Empire of Regions?" examines the nature of Charlemagne's empire from the perspective of local historiographical texts, usually denoted by scholars as "local annals," and in the relationship between Charlemagne and the Italian episcopate. With regard to the first of these issues, Davis argues that local annals, although preserving the political perspective of various regions, also were thoroughly influenced by court-based historiography, and also by capitularies. In the second part of the chapter, Davis, drawing on both capitularies and royal charters, concludes that Charlemagne both pushed Italian bishops to take on traditional Frankish duties such as providing justice, but also patronized them in ways that were different from his patronage of northern bishops.

In chapter five, Davis turns from the impact of the center upon the regions, and asks whether the regions influenced the governmental practices utilized by the king and court. Here, Davis turns to three case studies to argue that Charlemagne drew upon the Frankish experience in working with local regions to inform overall governmental policies. The first case study concerns regional reform councils in Bavaria, which Davis argues were not otherwise known in the Carolingian empire until the end of Charlemagne's reign. The second case study concerns the use of the inquest and community-based testimony to extend royal power in the judicial sphere. Drawing on a question raised by Donald Bullough concerning Charlemagne's experience of the judicial inquest during his conquest of Lombardy in the early 770s, Davis concludes that the model of involving the entire community in a judicial inquest headed by a royal official likely appealed to Charlemagne. In this context, however, Davis would have done well to consider more thoroughly the work of Stefan Esders,^[3] whose investigation of the Roman origins of the inquest for fiscal matters made clear that this tool of governance was well developed in the Frankish realm long before Charlemagne came to power. Davis's decision to emphasize a clear distinction between inquests undertaken for fiscal purposes and those undertaken for judicial purposes does not seem to fit the realities of Charlemagne's reign. The final example used by Davis to show the influence of the regions on the practices of the royal court concerns what she sees as developments in the format of capitularies over the course of Charlemagne's reign, which she traces to the impact of Italian legal traditions on Frankish practice.

The final chapter in this section is concerned with the problem of centralization and systematization. Traditionally, scholars going back to F. L. Ganshof argued that Charlemagne wanted to impose both centralization and uniformity on the empire, but failed.^[4] Davis wishes to refocus this discussion by arguing that Charlemagne sought centralization but not uniformity and succeeded. In this context, in the first half of the chapter, Davis identifies Charlemagne's continuous effort to make the court the center of information gathering on the basis of both oral and written reports, provided above all by the *missi*. Davis also notes in passing the importance of the written word for both estate administration and for the mobilization of the army. Contrary to the pessimistic model developed by Ganshof, Davis draws more upon the work of both Rosamond McKitterick and Janet Nelson (and many others could be adduced) to conclude that literacy permeated all levels of Carolingian royal government both at the

court and in the localities.[5] But here Davis would have done well to address the extensive scholarship on the physical communications infrastructure within the Carolingian empire that was maintained and directed by Charlemagne's government.[6] A sense of the range and scale of the information making its way to the royal court is also missing, as are the implications for the development of an apparatus of officials at court to assess and then respond to incoming communications. In the second half of the chapter, Davis turns to the role played by royal palaces, and particularly Aachen as centers of royal government, and concludes that during the final decades of Charlemagne's reign, Aachen functioned as an imperial capital.

Part three of the volume offers a reconsideration of the chronology of Charlemagne's reign in chapter seven, and an evaluation of Charlemagne's goals as a ruler in chapter eight. In addressing the overall development of Charlemagne's rule as king and emperor, Davis seeks to revise the traditional model established by Ganshof that the imperial coronation in 800 marked a turning point after which the great Charles devoted himself to governmental reform, only to see a breakdown in the empire after c. 806. Davis convincingly shows that this was not the case, and that Charlemagne devoted considerable attention to the practice of royal government no later than 790, which she sees as the real "pivot point" in his reign. Davis returns here to a theme first enunciated in the introduction that Charlemagne spent the first twenty years of his career conquering the empire and then next two decades figuring out how to rule it.

However, this formulation is far too neat, and does not account for the fact that Charlemagne had to make a large number of decisions about government well before 790. Indeed, the Saxon capitulary of 785 already shows his intent to establish a thoroughly Frankish style administration in this region as does his imposition of the Frankish comital system in Italy during the 770s. Because of her lack of attention to warfare, Davis also does not address Charlemagne's need to develop military institutions during the first twenty years of his reign to carry out campaigns that were on a scale not seen since the end of the Roman Empire in the West. An additional problem with Davis' enunciation of 790 as a turning point is her assertion that the increasing survival of capitularies after this date is evidence of the greater production of capitularies after this date. However, this does not logically follow, as the survival of capitularies produced in the eighth century, for which very few original manuscripts survive, is not evidence of original production but rather of the selection bias by later readers and scribes. In this context, Davis also does not deal with the problem of now-lost capitularies from the first half of Charlemagne's reign, references to which are to be found, not only in capitularies from later in his reign, but also in the capitularies of his son Louis the Pious and grandson Charles the Bald. In the second half of this chapter, Davis properly challenges the idea that Charlemagne and his empire began to grow decrepit at the same time. Davis correctly points out the ongoing military activity of Charlemagne's armies after 800, and indeed up to his death in 814, and might also have noted the widower sexagenarian fathered no fewer than six illegitimate children with three separate concubines over this period as well.

The final chapter begins with a discussion of Charlemagne's early reign and the mutual hostility with his brother Carloman. From here, Davis seeks to identify some constant elements in Charlemagne's political program, although continuing to emphasize that he never sought uniformity across the empire. The four elements Davis identifies are the search for salvation, royal dominance, establishing a community of the realm, and finally restricting local and regional power networks so that they came to focus on Charlemagne as an individual and his court. But aside from these constant themes, Davis asserts that Charlemagne did not have a "plan" as such, and did not intend to become emperor or recreate the Roman Empire.

Overall, this book has a number of strengths, not least Davis's effort to give force and meaning to the capitularies, which all too often in recent scholarship have been written off as hopeless fantasies. Davis also has done very well, in a manner similar to Roman Deutinger in his study of royal power in East

Francia,[7] to bring the king and royal court back into focus as a, if not the, major player in the governance of the Carolingian world. The strongest parts of the book are chapters one and two, in which Davis shows how royal governance actually operated under Charlemagne. It is to be regretted, therefore, that Davis chose not to address in any significant way two elements of royal power and authority that had as much to do with Charlemagne's government as did justice, namely the conduct of war and the maintenance of the fisc and associated royal rights and revenues. It should be emphasized that both of these topics loom quite large in Charlemagne's capitularies.

Conceptually, it is also difficult to follow Davis in her assertion that Charlemagne eschewed uniformity in his governance of the empire. It is clear, for example, that in the production of coinage, in the imposition of tithes for the support of churches, in the requirement for all precaria holders to pay a *census*, in the assumption of royal control over all woodlands throughout the empire, and in the requirement for ecclesiastical advocacies Charlemagne did, indeed, insist on uniformity. He did so as well in matters such as the production of military equipment across the empire, as illuminated in capitulary *de villis*. Davis also chose not to engage with scholars such as Christoph Sonnlechner and Walter Goffart, who have argued that Charlemagne imposed standardization on property units, namely the *mansî*, for the purposes of both taxation and military mobilization.[8] In addition, as Davis herself recognizes, Charlemagne sought to impose comital administration across the empire, both in regions that had a history of counts, such as Bavaria, and those such as Italy and Saxony that did not. When considering the issue of uniformity, that counties were of variable size is far less important than the decision by Charlemagne that all free men would be answerable to a count. One final point of criticism is a missed opportunity by Davis to spell out the implications of her findings more clearly, and to illuminate the size and complexity of Charlemagne's governing structures. Such an exercise may well have led Davis to reconsider her initial assumptions concerning the limited nature of administrative resources available to Charlemagne.

Despite these criticisms, however, this is a useful book, and one that will stimulate other fruitful investigations not only of Charlemagne's reign, but also lead to reevaluations of the nature of royal governance throughout the early medieval period. Whether one accepts some or all of Davis' conclusions, her study is now essential reading for all specialists working on early medieval Europe.

NOTES

[1] Timothy Reuter *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, c. 800-1056* (London: Addison-Wesley Longman, 1991), p. 27.

[2] Matthew Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages: The Middle Rhine Valley, 400-1000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jürgen Hannig, "Zentrale Kontrolle und regionale Machtbalance. Beobachtungen zum System der karolingischen Königsboten am Beispiel des Mittelrheingebiets," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 66(1984): 1-46.

[3] Stefan Esders "Die Römischen Wurzeln der fiskalischen Inquisitio der Karolingerzeit," in Claude Gauvard, ed., *L'Enquête au Moyen Âge* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2008), pp.13-28.

[4] F. L. Ganshof, "The Last Period of Charlemagne's Reign: A Study in Decomposition," in *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy: Studies in Carolingian History*, trans. J. Sondheimer (Ithaca: Prentice Hall Press, 1971), pp. 240-255.

[5] Janet L. Nelson, "Literacy in Carolingian Government," in Rosamond McKitterick, ed., *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 258-296; Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[6] One recent study that draws upon the large body of literature is Bernard S. Bachrach, *Charlemagne's Early Campaigns (768-777): A Diplomatic and Military Analysis* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

[7] Roman Deutinger, *Königsherrschaft im Ostfränkischen Reich: Eine pragmatische Verfassungsgeschichte der späten Karolingerzeit* (Stuttgart: Thorbecke, 2006).

[8] Christoph Sonnlechner, "The Establishment of New Units of Production in Carolingian Times: Making Early Medieval Sources Relevant for Environmental History," *Viator* 35(2004): 21-48; and Walter Goffart, "Frankish Military Duty and the Fate of Roman Taxation," *Early Medieval Europe* 16(2008): 166-190.

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